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SUBJECT: Cameroon: Municipal Elections Bode Well for Democracy

¶1. (U) On October 26, the Government of Cameroon (GRC) will re-run municipal elections in six districts where the Supreme Court determined the original elections (in July 2007) were fatally flawed. The government has held parliamentary re-run elections in the past. The Supreme Court annulled municipal elections results in 1997 and 2002, but the GRC effectively ignored the decisions and allowed the results to stand. This is the first time canceled municipal elections will be re-run, and in some of the most hotly contested regions of the country. It is not yet clear whether this round will be an improvement on the last. Nevertheless, the new precedent and the opportunity to exercise proper electoral procedures bode well for Cameroon's democratic development.

¶2. (U) In the Fifth District of Douala, Cameroon's port city and economic capital, the main opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) is locked in a bitter fight against the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CDPM) party's controversial mayor (and prominent former Member of Parliament) Francoise Foning. Foning's mayoral office was burned in the violence that engulfed Douala and other Cameroonian cities in February 2008 (igniting stories that charred voter cards, used for fraudulent voting, were found in the ashes). Allegations of renewed fraud and intimidation are already flying. In Matomb (Center Province), the ruling CDPM is battling against the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC), the party which historically claimed Cameroon's independence and reunification. After losing its National Assembly seats in the July 2007 elections and seeing its leader, former Minister of Planning Augustin Kodock, dismissed from the government in the September 2007 shuffle, the UPC is effectively fighting for its political survival.

¶3. (U) In Mogode and in Pette (both in the Far North Province), the CPDM and the National Union for Democracy and Progress (UNDP) are competing to gain the valuable endorsements of tradition leaders. In Bafang and Bana (West Province), the CPDM and SDF are contesting a close and highly-charged race.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: Mayors in Cameroon are prestigious, powerful elected positions, with the authority to raise and spend local funds, administer the delivery of local services, and appoint and dismiss local staff. The Supreme Court's decision to call for re-run elections, despite the political threat to the ruling CPDM (which won all these seats in 2007), was welcomed by many observers as a rare sign of growing independence in Cameroon's judiciary. The elections are being hotly contested in all six municipalities, and in one case (Mogode), four rival factions within the CPDM itself are vying for power. Top level CPDM officials are taking this election seriously and have assigned scores of senior CPDM and government officials to head the "finance committees" to boost their candidates. Given the high profile of these races, especially the Douala 5 contest, and the stakes for Cameroon's democratic development, post is sending observers to several of the elections.